

FUTURE MOVIES

READING THE SIGNS

A Passion for Mandroids – part one of a new series of special features exploring some recurring Science Fiction themes.

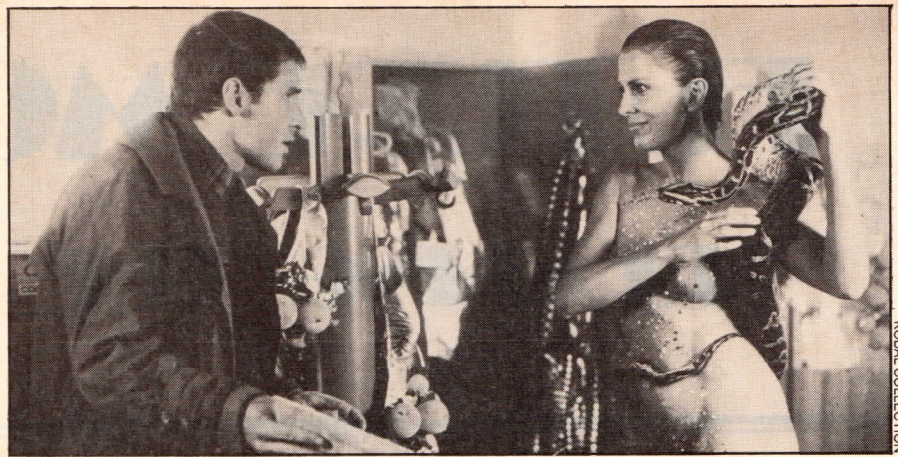
"Hi there! You're talking to a machine!"

The answer-phone pipes up in *The Terminator* just as the computerised killer with the German accent claims two more innocent victims. Like so many sequences from the film, its combination of violence, irony and suspense sets the memory-banks aglow. We've been programmed with this kind of signal many times in recent years – in fact there's scarcely an image in *The Terminator* that we don't recognise, if only vaguely, as having evolved from the fantasies and effects, the shocks and stimulants of the cinema's past decade. Nobody is likely to claim that with its comic-strip dialogue and ludicrous narrative *The Terminator* is the greatest of films. But its immense success at the box-office confirms that it's probably the most significant movie of the 1980s, precisely because it has rounded up all the elements that have come to represent the highest level of audience satisfaction in today's film and video market. It's a contrived, cynical, and most informative smash hit.

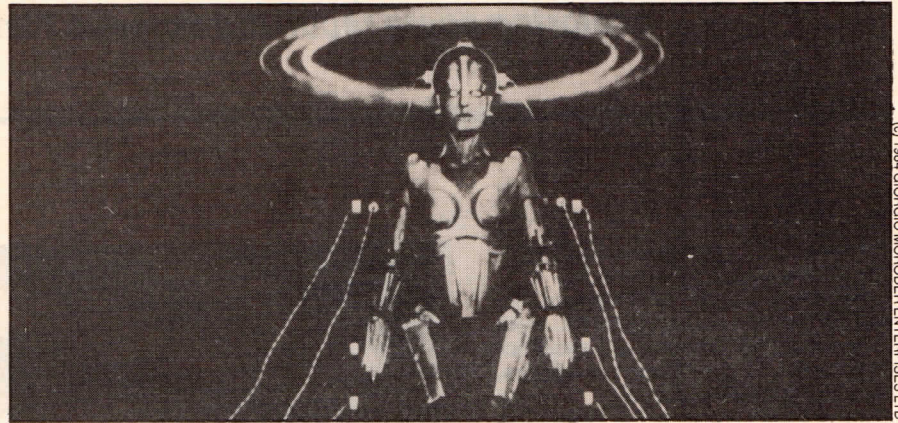
I think it's worth retrieving some of that information for an enhanced print-out of what the cinema has been telling us about our future. The lines from the *The Terminator* lead to at least half-a-dozen monitors, and now that 1984 is safely behind us with relatively few of Orwell's terrors having materialised we might as well have a fresh set of baleful anticipations to contemplate. If nothing else, they might hint at how the cinema, that unlimited storage centre of alternative realities, will re-compute all the crises that we'll be busy trying to avoid for real during the next half-century. As illustrated by *The Terminator*, the first and most obvious of these will be an escalation of our struggle with the 'mandroids', those ominously homicidal integrations of metal with flesh. More of that in a moment. In future issues of *Films & Filming* we'll take up other such *Terminator* themes as nuclear survival,



Arnold Schwarzenegger as the rapidly disintegrating Terminator.



Harrison Ford questions Zhora (Joanna Cassidy) whom he suspects of being a dangerous replicant in *Blade Runner*.



Darryl Hannah as one of Ridley Scott's replicants in *Blade Runner*.

Brigitte Helm as the robotic Maria in *Metropolis*.

urban anarchy, alien invasion, planetary collapse, and the struggle for utopia. Something for everyone, so watch this space...

The mandroids have been around in movies at least since the pioneer work of Méliès, whose fascination with gadgetry was expressed through numerous brief dramas (including a *Coppélia* in 1900), but the serious implications of the 'artificial life' concept ought really to date from the first screen *Frankenstein* in 1910. It was a clownish film, judging from what remains of it, but it maintained a crucial debate: the Creature's anxiety, as Mary Shelley spelled out in the original novel, derived from its lack of a soul, the one faculty its human designer was unable to implant by spare-part surgery. Entitlement to this elusive and inorganic privilege is, like some cosmic Diner's Club card, the one guarantee of admission to the human race, and any monster with the ability to think is going to turn briskly delinquent when it realises that, no matter how perfect its physique, it's going to remain in the cold without one.

That, at least, is the assumption of those of us *with* souls (for which we too, nevertheless, devote lifetimes of search). And from that assumption has sprung, in the parables we tell ourselves, a whole army of vengeful robots, fuelled by our own guilt, battering their way across our

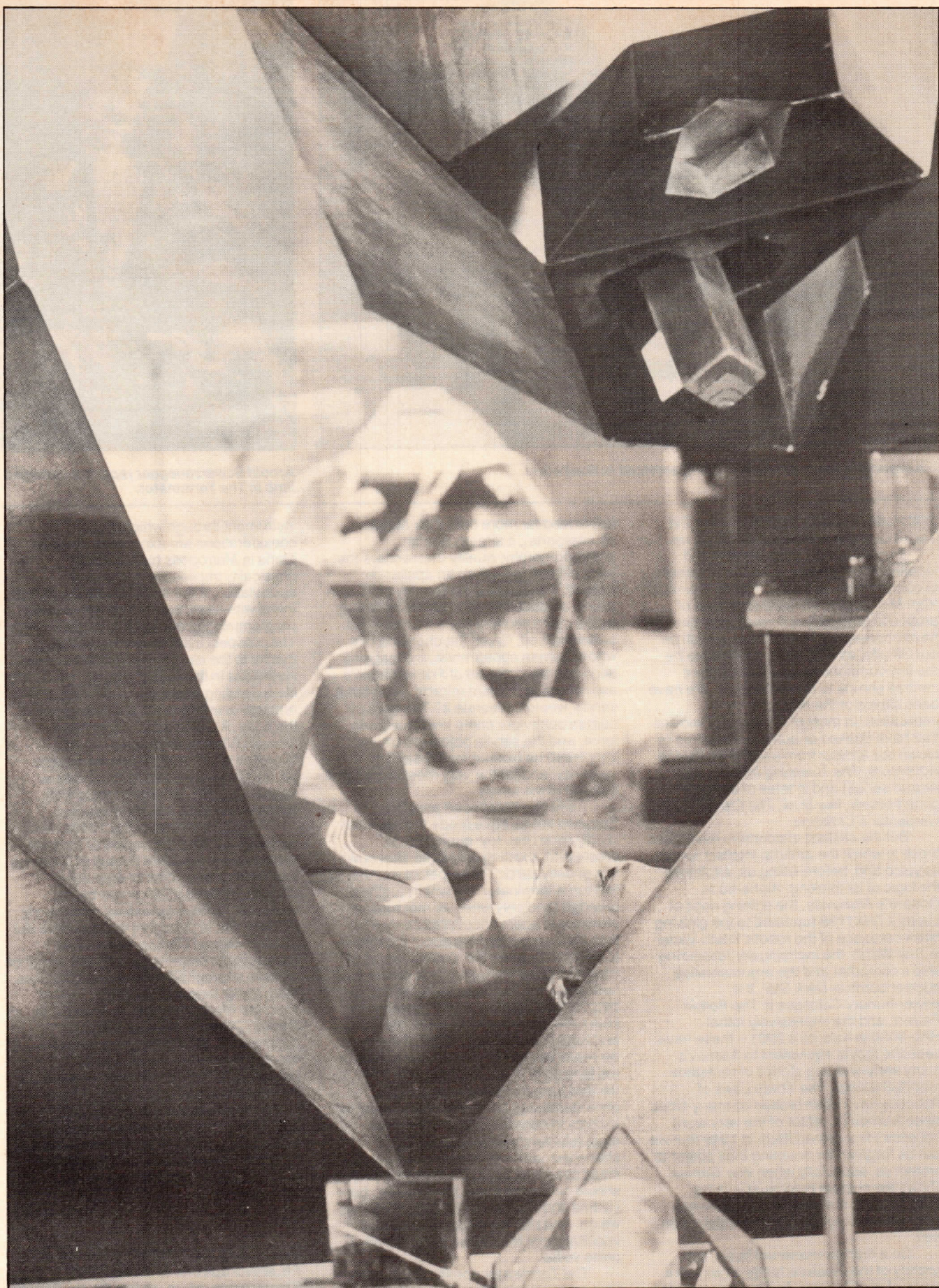
fragile society. "Hey, man," protests a pedestrian shouldered rudely aside by the trundling Terminator, "you've got a serious attitude problem!" And of course 'he' has. He's less than perfect. He's just a replicant, created like those in *Blade Runner* for a specific purpose. Mission accomplished, he might well, like them, turn to a more profound objective – his own place in the world, and a solution to the 'attitude' difficulty. He's no Darryl Hannah, but he too has to survive, and he too has enemies who unreasonably seek to oppose his programmed purpose. Although nowhere as sophisticated as the *Blade Runner* artefacts except in his lifelike appearance, he too would defend his right to exist.

But the Terminator, it might be argued, is made by machine, not by humans. He's merely a high-tech weapon created, like a guided missile, for a single mission. The case still stands: in the film's machine-dominated futureworld, man continues to be both enemy and victim, receiving the punishment he has earned for himself. The scowling Schwarzenegger, exaggeratedly human at the best of times, represents an expression of the same impulse that drove *Frankenstein's* Creature – the desire (which we implanted) to prove us wrong. Machinery, after all, reflects exclusively human needs; it mirrors our hungers, our

ambitions, our entertainment, and our vices. And like us, it can malfunction. Very frequently.

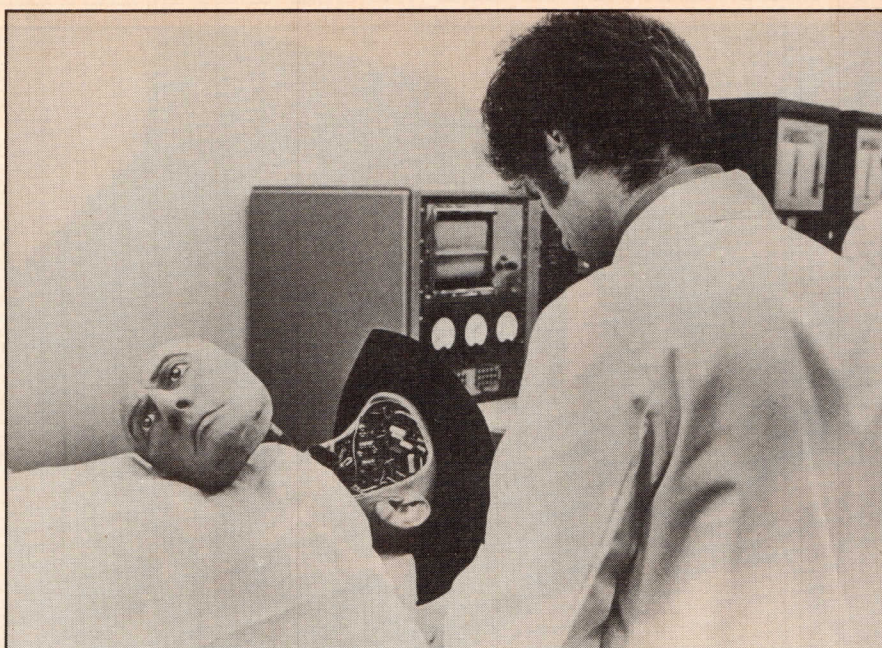
The two pillars of the machine age, the profit and loss columns, were set up in *Metropolis* in 1926. And now, with little sign of strain, Lang's portrait of the Moloch syndrome is back with us again, fashionably coloured and orchestrated but with messages intact. Comparison between the *Metropolis* hordes and the London rush hour show that nothing much has changed (except that the workers can strike if they feel so inclined, thus intensifying the problems). Below ground, we are slaves to a consuming furnace of telephones, electric typewriters and computer consoles into which the days of our lives are shovelled like coals. Above, we celebrate a gadget-crammed leisure, our dreams and appetites gratified by the press of a button, at the mercy of stalled vehicles and power-failures and closer than ever to the fatally indolent community that fell apart in E. M. Forster's story 'The Machine Stops'. The god-like ruler of *Metropolis* seems to have it all under control, but the sad fact is he's only a politician. The film's most seductive personality is the screen's sexiest girdroid until Zhora (Joanna Cassidy in *Blade Runner*), Brigitte Helm's wonderfully evil incarnation of the robotrix Maria. Her function may not be altogether clear, even

A Passion for Mandroids



KOBAL COLLECTION

Julie Christie impregnated by a machine in the much-maligned Demon Seed.



KOBAL COLLECTION

Yul Brynner's faulty gunfighter being serviced in Westworld.



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Arnold Schwarzenegger repairs a damaged limb in The Terminator.

in Moroder's special edition, but like the Terminator she certainly stirs things up.

Two extremes, then, slavery and idolatry. And between them the possibility of compromise, of fusion. Taking their cue from *Metropolis*, the hardware films of prophetic (and perhaps prosthetic) cinema have obsessively tested these stimuli on our circuits, as if we were destined to be the tiny components of entertainment centres shrunk to microchip size. We have been slaves of the machine, by implication, in most of the disaster movies that have quaked or burned or washed or blown our armour from us (*The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Towering Inferno*, the *Airport* series) as if we were destined to be the tiny components of entertainment centres shrunk to microchip size. We have been slaves of the machine, by implication, in most of the disaster movies that have quaked or burned or washed or blown our armour from us (*The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Towering Inferno*, the *Airport* series) as if we were destined to be the tiny components of entertainment centres shrunk to microchip size. We have been slaves of the machine, by implication, in most of the disaster movies that have quaked or burned or washed or blown our armour from us (*The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Towering Inferno*, the *Airport* series) as if we were destined to be the tiny components of entertainment centres shrunk to microchip size.

But the chilliest encounters have been those in which the artificial intellect found its voice and, before killing us, explained the logic of its thinking. Alpha-60 in Godard's *Alphaville*, the shining cops of Lucas's *THX1138* (updated to the glowing black carapace of the robotic Darth Vader in *Star Wars*), the ineffectually reassuring ship's computer and the argumentative nuclear bomb in *Dark Star*, the power-hungry Colossus in *The Forbin Project*, and the impassively lethal HAL-9000 in Kubrick's *2001* – these have been the movie equivalent to Asimov's many early-warning stories of renegade robot behaviour. The Three Laws of Robotics have been broken so many times since Asimov (inventor of the very word 'robotics') first coined them in 1940 that we can be forgiven for doubting their power to protect us, especially when *War Games* shows the nuclear holocaust is mere child's play to the world's computer-run defence systems. But we can dream, can't we?

On a man-to-mandroid basis, the tyranny of the machine takes on an extra range of implications. As squeaky cylinder or fussy translation device, like the robot heroes of *Star Wars* (significantly

celebrated far more than their human counterparts), it already has an anthropomorphic quality that renders the thing difficult to treat as an appliance; instead, it acquires a personality of its own, a form of robot liberation entitlement that would make you feel like a murderer for switching it off. Given the charisma of a wholly human appearance, the machine becomes the pinnacle of Frankenstein's aspirations, a modern miracle. Who but a vandal would desecrate it? The laws of human behaviour come irrationally into force, and the servile object will (at the very least) be clothed for the sake of 'decency' and (at the very most) be treated like one of the family.

Films like *Westworld* and *The Stepford Wives* have made this dilemma vividly clear: the 'toy' gunfighter of *Westworld*, existing only to be shot down in a ghastly parody of perpetual murder, at last turns terminator in a wholly justified revenge (and only when its mechanical structure is again uncovered can we be less than uncomfortable about the efforts to destroy it), while the 'perfect' wives of Stepford, programmed only to gratify their husbands, are too beautiful to reject despite their erosion of 'real' society. In both films, people and toys are the same – and were it not for that matter of the soul, we really wouldn't mind too much. Part of the tension of *2010*, the sequel to *2001*, is derived from the 'psychology' of the once-demented computer which, restored lovingly to consciousness once more, must reluctantly be presented by its cherished tutor with a fresh crisis that could send it haywire. It's irrational that we should care what a machine 'thinks', but Hyams and Clarke can be quite sure that we do. And Hal, for whom dreams are important too, is simply a red lens with a polite voice.

The Terminator doesn't waste 'his' time on considerations of love and death, any more than a telephone would. But like a telephone he's a surprisingly vital

instrument through which those considerations are expressed. And like Maria in *Metropolis* his mandroid physicality implies the successful assimilation of the artificial with the human, metal with flesh, from which with careful programming some stability might emerge. The prospect instinctively fascinates us, thanks to the already-familiar life-support inventions in the field of surgery and to the life-extending implications of being able to replace, or improve on, any failing part of the body. A bionic super-race, living forever! What other purpose could evolution offer? And so fantasy cinema has increasingly given its machines a sexual curiosity, an urge to meld with humanity by the most direct means.

At last the robots of the 1940s, who rampaged across the covers of the pulp magazines in impotent pursuit of shrieking spacegirls, have come of age. Julie Christie, trapped in her home by the computer Proteus (speaking with the oily tones of Robert Vaughn) in the superb but much-maligned *Demon Seed*, finds unexpected compensation for the horror of artificial impregnation by giving birth once more to her long-lost daughter. In *Star Trek: the Motion Picture*, in *Android*, in *Electric Dreams*, the courtship has continued. It acknowledges a passion which, reluctant as we may be to recognise it, can be identified every day in the nursery fondling of battery-driven miniatures, in the stroking of pocket calculators and computer keyboards, and in the proud, delicate ritual of washing the new car. The passion of the mandroids, quite clearly, is founded on a mutual attraction.

PHILIP STRICK

Don't miss next month's FILMS & FILMING special feature, 'The Streetfighters', in which Philip Strick continues his provocative exploration of themes from *The Terminator*!